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NAME-PLAY AND STRUCTURE IN THE OLD ENGLISH EXODUS

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The Old English Exodus combines narration and high poetic intensity. The poem recounts the passage of the Israelites through the Red Sea and the destruction of the Egyptians by God's hand. It follows an essentially chronological pattern, and apparently ends with a satisfactory sense of closure: the Israelites celebrate their successful escape from the Egyptian exile.<sup>1</sup> Even though the poem is a narrative, however, word play, grammatical and syntactical play, and a broad range of imagery typify it. Any reading of Exodus notices an unusual degree of compression, vibrant imagery, and a combination of the two rarely found in Anglo-Saxon literature.

Just as noticable, the poem digresses into apparently extraneous subject areas, where in the midst of the Israelites' flight we find extended discussions of Noah and Abraham. This so-called digression, indeed much of the material that is not wholly narrative, has properly been attributed to the allegorical and typological impact of the poem. As early as 1902, J. W. Bright argued for recognizing the essential baptismal imagery of the work. Cross and Tucker, much later, proposed a more thorough allegorical reading. But J. W. Earl has made the singlemost important contribution to our understanding of the Exodus. Concentrating on the final section of the poem, the so-called digression, and several pervasive images, Earl demonstrates that ideas control the poem, rather than narrative structure, specifically, "the concepts of judgement and salvation as they are expressed in the traditions surrounding the Old Testament types for baptism."<sup>2</sup>

Most recently, in a new edition of Exodus, Peter J. Lucas has observed a thematic cohesion in the work. Agreeing with Earl, Lucas notices that the narrative shifts of the poem do not necessarily illuminate allegorical interpretation, and that the "allegorical hints" do not provide a frame for the narrative. Rather, according to Lucas, the theme of salvation is "the most powerful unifying factor in the poem." Lucas does 'read' the broad strokes of the poem's allegory, identifying in particular the Ship of the Church imagery, and he recognizes the essential typology of the work, pointing out where the poem asks for figural interpretation:

Gif onlucan wile lifes wealhstod...  
 gīnfaesten god Gastes caegon,  
 run biþ gerecenod....  
 nu us boceras beteran secgāþ  
 lengren lyftwynna.<sup>3</sup>

In short, Lucas concludes that the poem is replete with allegorical and typological implications, and that these and the narration are held together by the theme of salvation. He maintains that "the exodus of the Israelites is interpreted as the salvation of mankind."<sup>4</sup>

Exodus, then, is figural as well as narrative and poetic, and these modes of thought and expression are interrelated by the typological theme of salvation. Moreover, the interrelationship of the three is supported by juxtaposition, narrative shift, multi-leveled imagery, and other techniques--among them, onomastic play. Indeed, primarily because of the work of Fred C. Robinson, we have been alerted to the value of onomastic study for Old English literature. We accept that narrative patterns, poetic compression, and figural images are frequently correlated through name-play in Old English.<sup>5</sup> Exodus is simply one example where the effect of the correlation is striking. For here we find names that

serve multiple duty as labels, historical and typological allusions, etymological puns, and most importantly, as structural support for the theme of salvation.

The easiest to recognize of the various poetic uses of names are the apparently simple allusions like "Abrahames sunum" (l. 18), "Moyses magum" (l. 52), or "Iosepes gestreon" (l. 588). Like all allusions, they carry associations with them that modify their contexts while being limited by them. They can, of course, periphrastically avoid repetition, or they can call to mind a broad range of events, qualities or characteristics, and thereby serve many poetic purposes. For example, the allusion to "Iosepes gestreon" near the end of the poem recalls the beginning of the Egyptian exile which began with Joseph, aiding the poem's sense of conclusion--of closure.<sup>6</sup> Or "Abrahames sunum," while referring to the Israelites, compels us to see them as Abraham's descendents, reminding us that they are the Chosen People of the covenant who are bound for the land promised generations earlier. This particular allusion provokes a series of associations that includes at least the following: 'Abraham' recalls the covenant which he made with God; his 'sons' receive this covenant; the Israelites are called his sons, and therefore should be thought of in terms of the covenant. Notably, the context here aids the allusion by emphasizing the reward from God, "onwist eþles" (l. 18): literally, 'habitation of homeland,' historically, the land of Canaan, and figuratively, the promise of salvation.

For the covenant, of course, was not simply a land grant; it was the promise of salvation for all of the descendents of Abraham. This idea is so basic to medieval Christian thought (and much later Christian thought) that it need not be rehearsed here. Any reader of Paul's letter

to the Romans, the epistle to the Hebrews, or countless commentaries was fully aware of the necessity to imitate Abraham's faith, and thereby share in the promise of salvation.<sup>7</sup> Important for our purposes is the recollection of the covenant and salvation through the use of allusive names and supporting context.

Denotative play--specifically, traditional etymological play--is also evident in Exodus. Editors and critics of the work have noticed a variety of specific etymological puns. In his edition of Exodus, Edward Burroughs Irving recognizes "an Faeder" (l. 353) as a punning reference to Abraham. Robinson sees a play on 'Israel' in "onriht Codes" (l. 358), and a variety of plays on 'Egypt' and 'Egyptian' (ll. 194, 204, 224, 498, 501) derived from their traditional interpretations as persequens, affligens, tribulens, and tenebrae. D. G. Calder argues that "ece lafe" is a play on 'Noah' (l. 370), and J.F. Vickrey that we have name play in "Iosepes gestreon" (l. 588).<sup>8</sup> We should also add 'Isaac' to the list. At line 405, he is referred to as Abraham's "langsumme hiht," his 'long-enduring joy.' Jerome, in his influential De Nominibus Hebraicis, begins a long tradition when he claims that "Isaac [interpretatur] risus vel gaudium." In varying ways, Gregory, Bede, the Glossa Ordinaria, and Rabanus Maurus maintain the tradition.<sup>9</sup> The Exodus poet follows this tradition when he translates gaudium as "hiht," emphasizing the fact that Isaac will be saved. In subtle fashion, the name-play anticipates the joy of Isaac's salvation and parallels the celebration of the Israelites after their passage of the Sea.<sup>10</sup>

'Moses,' of course, is the most prevalent name in the poem. And since he is the major actor in the narrative, his name is frequently simple and referential. Yet when the traditional etymology of his



name is recalled, 'Moses' seems to read as more than mere reference. Among the etymologies that Jerome lists for 'Moses,' one is fairly common in later commentators: "sumptus ex aqua," or variously, "aquaticus."<sup>11</sup> With this in mind, we can see plot and character come together in an unusual way in the name. 'Moses' refers to the major character in the work and denotes the major event of the plot. Since Moses and his followers are literally taken 'from the water,' the name anticipates the plot. Unfortunately, it is difficult to make more of this than a nice bit of irony since the Exodus poet seems to make little of it himself. But since he is obviously aware of etymologies elsewhere, we can hardly dismiss this out of hand.

Far more clear and more important to the impact of the poem are the plays on 'Abraham.' In traditional etymology, 'Abraham' means some form of 'father,' and his paternal role is important throughout Exodus. Jerome glosses 'Abraham' variously as "pater videns populum" and "pater videns multitudinem."<sup>12</sup> Bede, like others, develops the gloss significantly when commenting upon the important change of name from Abram to Abraham; he notes that Abraham's descendents include not only those who were brought forth from his seed, but also those who imitated the lead of his faith and obedience.<sup>13</sup> Abraham means 'father' and his paternity extends to all those who are his spiritual descendents as well as his physical ones.

The notion is an important one for Exodus. The poem reminds us of Abraham's change of name (l. 381), and we find at least seven different examples of plays on the name, all recalling his paternity. The plays are of two different types: those that refer covertly to Abraham, and those which use the name or its denotation to refer to

the Israelites as descendants of Abraham. We have already seen one of each type: the reference to "an faeder" (l. 353) noted by Irving exemplifies the first, and the use of "Abrahames sunum" (l. 18), the second. But any one of the individual references is less important than the pattern that they all comprise, for this pattern frames and helps to structure the theme of salvation, integrating the so-called digression (ll. 380-446), formally as well as thematically.

We have seen that the early use of "Abrahames sunum" alludes to the Israelites and thereby recalls their place in the covenant. The same effect is achieved more obliquely a little later on when the Israelites are called the "faedera cyn" (l. 29). The Israelites are kin of the father, etymologically, kin of Abraham. We have here a combination of an etymological pun and an allusion, both of which are necessary to recognizing the role of the Israelites as types of men on the road to salvation.

If this complex device is not convincing in isolation, another instance occurs much later in the work. Indeed, the references to the Israelites mentioned above (ll. 18 and 29) balance with a similar one where Moses, summing up the significance of the passing of the Red Sea, recalls the covenant made between God and the "faederyncynne":

"wile nu gelaestan þæt He lange gehet  
mid aþsware, engla Drihten,  
in fyrndagum faederyncynne." <sup>14</sup>

Familiar in Anglo-Saxon poetry, "faederyncynne" is usually taken to mean 'paternal kindred' or something of the sort.<sup>15</sup> But here the meaning is probably much more specific. As we know, the poet is sensitive to the meaning of 'Abraham,' and since the reference appears in the context of God's promise to the Israelites--specifically the covenant of Abraham--

the word means the 'kin of Abraham' as well as the 'kin of the father.'

As the action of the poem is anticipated by early reminders of the Israelites' relationship, so a similar reminder closes the action here. The major event of Exodus--the passing of the Red Sea--is preceded and followed by onomastic recollections of the Abrahamic covenant. The name-plays frame the passage, helping to define it as a passage to spiritual salvation as well as a flight from Egyptian exile. The puns support the typology of the work.

Also, these framing puns help us to see how the Noah and Abraham digression fits into the poem, formally and thematically. The digression is a short recollection of Jewish history, significantly, one that is introduced by a presentation of Abraham's paternity, again through name-play. As the tribes of Israel enter the Red Sea, we get a short catalog of three of them--the tribes of Judah, Reuben, and Simeone (ll. 319-46)--and the others follow "cynn aefter cynne" (l. 351). The poem leaves the narration here for something more than one hundred lines, the interruption beginning and ending with recognition of the unity of the Israelites in their common ancestry and birthright. At the opening, we find:

' ...Him waes an faeder,  
leof leodfruma, landriht gepah,  
frod on ferhpe, freomagum leof.<sup>16</sup>

The closing presents much the same notion. Addressing Abraham, the "stefn of heofonum" (l. 417) tells him of the land promised "leode pine,/ freobearn faeder, folca selost" (ll. 445-6), 'to your people, free-born of the father, best of folks.'

The notion of a free people is repeated in both cases, but more importantly, the opening and the closing of the digression both remind



us of the Israelites' relationship to Abraham and of their participation in the covenant: the opening mentions the "landriht" (l. 354), where the closing specifies "land Cananea" (l. 445a). Working in conjunction with the plays on 'Abraham,' these references to the covenant recall the theme of salvation that runs throughout the work. In fact, this piece of 'digressive' salvation history is framed by onomastic play in much the same way that the passage of the Red Sea is framed. Both should alert the reader to the essential typology of the work, and the frame-within-a-frame structure establishes parallels among the Israelites, Noah and his kin, and Isaac preserved from the knife.

Lucas has pointed out how much of the digression is concerned with the confirmation of the covenant through Abraham's faith and God's saving of Isaac: as God saved Isaac, so He saves the Israelites.<sup>17</sup> As mentioned earlier, Isaac was a type of the saved, and like the frame, the pun on Isaac's name supports the details of the typology. In the digression, the 'joy' of his name anticipates the celebration of the Israelites in the broader narration. After being reminded by Moses of God's promise of salvation, and after witnessing the fulfillment of this promise in the passage of the sea, we are told that the Israelites were joyful, that the "werod waes on salum" (l. 565).

The Noah section functions in a similar way. As Isaac is the 'joy' of his father's faith, Noah and his kin are the 'eternal remnants' of the flood--"ece lafe" (l. 370). The typing of Noah and his family as 'remnant' apparently enjoyed considerable commerce in Anglo-Saxon England, for besides Exodus, the notion also appears in Genesis A, where Noah or Noah and his family are referred to as "wraþa lafe" (l. 1496) and "waetra lafe" (l. 1549).<sup>18</sup> Here and in Exodus we have another potential name-play--

though the evidence is strained. For the apocalyptic Book of Enoch (Enoch I) etymologizes 'Noah' as 'he shall be left,' and on the evidence adduced by Robert Kaske, we can tentatively conclude that the Book of Enoch was available in Anglo-Saxon England.<sup>19</sup> In traditional etymology, in the tradition of Jerome, 'Noah' is etymologized as requies, but the Ethiopic text of Enoch that has come down to us reads Ṭḥb, meaning "what is left, spared, remnant."<sup>20</sup> Danielou and Calder have both rather blithely accepted 'remnant' as a play on 'Noah,' and if we agree with them, we can see the etymological play echoing throughout the work in the various uses of "laf."<sup>21</sup>

But the evidence is tenuous at best. As Lucas implies in his note to "ece lafe" in Exodus (l. 370)--our primary example of play on 'Noah'--the phrase must grammatically refer to his family rather than to Noah himself.<sup>22</sup> Although this sort of reference is quite possible--referring to Noah's family by a pun on his name--the thread of the evidence is wearing very thin. We are certainly on safer ground if we view the recurrences of 'laf' as evidence of the theological notion of remnant in the poem, and accept it as linguistic support for the onomastic pattern found in the play on 'Abraham.'<sup>23</sup>

For the solid name-play that we have in Exodus is strengthened throughout the poem. As Noah's family is called the "ece lafe," so Isaac is called "yrfelafe" (l. 403) and "leodum to lafe" (l. 405). The Israēlites, after passing the Red Sea, are referred to as the "saelafe" (l. 585), certainly an echo of the Deluge as well as a literal reference. The correlation is furthered--by negation--when we are told that no remnant of the Egyptians returned home: "þaes heriges ham eft ne com/ ealles ungrundes aenig to lafe" (ll. 508-9).

We have solid evidence of the play on 'Abraham.' Its etymology is consistently posed as 'father' in Patristic sources. Its appearance in Exodus aligns with the historical context of the narrative and with the theme of salvation that is the nucleus of the poem. The isolated examples of plays on 'Abraham' work in conjunction with the many other etymological puns available, all of them enriching Exodus and increasing its density. Likewise, the plays on 'Abraham' can be allusive as well as denotative, expanding the historical and thematic context of Exodus, even while increasing its poetic power. Finally, the repetition of plays on 'Abraham' frame the major event of Exodus, and during this event, the major digression is similarly framed. Structural repetition correlates the two and demonstrates their common thematic core--salvation and salvation history. The variety of ways that 'Abraham' is used in Exodus attests, certainly, to the importance of him as a historical and theological figure, but this variety attests also to the subtle and sophisticated regard for proper names that exist in Anglo-Saxon literature.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The poem may end imperfectly, but I have discovered no attempt to argue for an incomplete text.

<sup>2</sup>J. W. Earl, "Christian Tradition in the Old English Exodus," NM, 71 (1970), 560. See also J. W. Bright, "The Relation of the Caedmonian Exodus to the Liturgy," MLN (1912), 97-103; J. E. Cross and S. I. Tucker, "Allegorical Tradition and the Old English Exodus," Neophil, 44 (1960), 122-7.

<sup>3</sup>Peter J. Lucas, ed., Exodus (London, 1977), ll. 523-32. All subsequent references will be to this text, noted parenthetically.

Translation of the Old English is provided in the notes:

If the interpreter [soul] wishes to unlock...  
The long-lasting good by the keys of the spirit,  
The secret will be explained....  
Now book-men speak to us of better  
And longer heavenly-joys.

<sup>4</sup>Lucas, Exodus, p. 69. See his entire discussion entitled "Theme," pp. 61-9.

<sup>5</sup>See "The Significance of Names in Old English Literature," Anglia, 86 (1968), 14-58, and "Some Uses of Name-Meanings in Old English Poetry," NM, 69 (1968), 161-71. A general survey of literary onomastics is Elizabeth M. Rajec, The Study of Names in Literature: A Bibliography (New York, 1978).

<sup>6</sup>John F. Vickrey has argued for reading a pun on 'Joseph' here; see "Exodus and the treasure of the Pharoah," ASE, 1 (1972), 162.

<sup>7</sup>For an introduction to the theology and typology of the covenant, see "Covenant," New Catholic Encyclopedia (New York, 1976), Vol. 4, and the article in G. Kittel, ed., Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1964), 104-34. For a more specific study,

see Zacharias Thundyl, "A Study of the Anglo-Saxon Concept of Covenant and its Sources with Special Reference to Anglo-Saxon Laws and the Old English Poems: The Battle of Maldon and Guthlac," Diss. Notre Dame 1969.

<sup>8</sup>See Irving's notes to lines 66, 81, and 353, The Old English Exodus, Yale Studies in English, 122 (New Haven, Conn., 1953). For Robinson, see Anglia, 86 (1968), 26-8, and NM, 69 (1968), 167. Calder's discussion is "Two Notes on the Typology of the Old English Exodus," NM, 74 (1973), 86. See Vickrey, p. 162.

<sup>9</sup>PL, 23, 780. Rabanus follows Jerome in Comm. in Matt., I (PL, 107, 738) whereas Bede, following Gregory, is not quite as definite about accepting gaudium in his Hexameron, IV: "Isaac interpretatur risus.... Risus autem ille decentar gaudium Novi Testamenti" (PL, 91, 164). See Gregory's Moralia (PL, 75, 918). The Glossa Ordinaria maintains that Isaac means "risus vero ex laetitia" (PL, 113, 144).

<sup>10</sup>For a discussion of the typology of the sacrifice of Isaac, see Jean Danielou, From Shadows to Reality, trans. Wulstan Hibbard (London, 1960), pp. 115-30.

<sup>11</sup>PL, 23, 789. See also Isidore, Etymologiarum, VII (PL, 82, 278); Rabanus, De Universo, III (PL, 111, 52); Glossa Ordinaria (PL, 114, 442); and Pseudo-Bede, In Psalmorum (PL, 93, 893).

<sup>12</sup>PL, 26, 390. See also Ambrose, De Abraham (PL, 14, 432); Augustine, De Civitate Dei (PL, 41, 507); and Isidore Etymologiarum (PL, 82, 281).

<sup>13</sup>In Genesim (PL, 91, 161): "...non solus earum quae ex eius semine secundum carnem prodirent, sed et earum quae aliunde originem carnem ducentes fidei et obedientiae eius vestigia sequerenter."

<sup>14</sup>ll.558-60: Now he will fulfill what he long promised  
With oath, the Lord of angels,  
In early days to the kin of the father.



<sup>15</sup>See Joseph Bosworth and T. Northcote Toller, An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary (Oxford, 1898).

<sup>16</sup>Ll.353-5: ...to them was one father  
Beloved originator of the people; the land-right thrived  
The prudent on earth, dear kinsman.

<sup>17</sup>Peter J. Lucas, "The Cloud of Interpretation of the Old English Exodus," ES, 51 (1970), 299.

<sup>18</sup>A. N. Doane, Genesis A: A New Edition (Madison, Wisc., 1978).

<sup>19</sup>Robert Kaske, "Beowulf and the Book of Enoch," Speculum, 46 (1971), 421-32. Kaske cites Bede's possible familiarity, a fragmentary Latin translation, Beowulf, and Soloman and Saturn as his evidence.

<sup>20</sup>Jerome is again the apparent fountainhead of the tradition. He reads requies (PL, 23, 782). See also Bede, In Genesim (PL, 91, 221); Rabanus, Comm. in Genesim (PL, 107, 510); and the Glossa Ordinaria (PL, 113, 103). For the Ethiopic Text, see Johanne Flemming, Das Buch Henoch, Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der Altchristlichen Literatur, Vol. 22 (Leipzig, 1902), CVI, 16-18. An English translation is R. H. Charles, The Book of Enoch (Oxford, 1912). See also Wolf Leslau, Concise Amharic Dictionary (Wiebaden, 1976).

<sup>21</sup>Danielou, pp. 74-5, esp. n. 1; Calder, p. 86.

<sup>22</sup>Lucas, Exodus, note to l. 370.

<sup>23</sup>See the excellent discussion of the concept of remnant in the Old and New Testaments in Kittel, Vol. 4, 194-214.